

Memory

It could be said that memory makes us who we are. Memories give us our sense of time and place, can reduce us to tears or bring about a smile. But memory is elusive and plays games with us too, shifting with time and confusing the facts.

Objects have long been used to help us remember. As a physical reminder of past events, we invest them with meaning and importance. We all keep objects that mean something special, from family heirlooms to a favourite coffee mug.

All the objects on display in this gallery have their own particular life histories. Some were once treasured personal possessions, and some commemorate historic events. Others evoke memories of a past way of life. This section explores these stories more closely.

Life Events

A life can be measured in many ways:
through history, knowledge, career and achievement.
But the personal moments are what really shape us,
providing the measure and meaning of life.

Birth and childhood, love and partnership,
old age, death and whatever comes next;
these are the emotional milestones of life,
of struggle and sadness, laughter and joy.
They are the making of human experience
and are shared by us all, across time and culture.
They become the memories we treasure most.

As the days of our lives slip steadily by,
the objects that mark out these life events
take on a special significance.
From christening robes and wedding rings
to widow's weeds and tombstones,
they become both personal memorials
and reminders of our shared humanity.

Personal Ritual

Life is given structure by ritual and routine; we take comfort in the familiar patterns of each day. Some of these are public and community-based whilst others are more intimate, intensely personal – small moments that keep us in touch with ourselves.

From sitting in front of a dressing room mirror preparing yourself for the day ahead, to relaxing in the bath when the day's work is done, our lives are made up of these little performances that keep us feeling healthy, happy and connected. These are the times we devote entirely to ourselves, to the contemplation of our space in the world.

Here are personal possessions of an intimate nature, the contents of pockets and handbags, aids to beauty, good health and long life, the means for putting our thoughts down on paper. All these objects reflect our most private moments, and all form the subject of Personal Ritual.

Social Ritual

Afternoon tea, or dinner with friends and family, going out for a coffee, or having a drink in the pub are just a few of the social rituals enjoyed by many. Some rituals have survived through the centuries, or been adapted to suit our ever-changing society, whilst others have been lost in the mists of time.

Different cultures have their own social rituals. Although sometimes seen as strange and exotic, they often inspire other countries to adopt them. Food, drink and the rituals associated with them, once new, expensive or for the elite, are now taken for granted and part of everyday life.

The objects on display reflect some of those rituals; where they came from and how they have changed, those that have survived and those that were lost. They each tell a story about a time and a place, the people from the past and society today.

Telling Tales

With the passing of time, life becomes history.
What happens today is transformed by tomorrow
into just another story that fades and is forgotten.
But we look for ways of holding onto history,
of fixing it, keeping it real and alive
for future generations to know.

Mementoes, keepsakes and souvenirs
form the subject of this display.
Objects that celebrate and commemorate,
that speak of lives lived and events unfolding,
from the coronation of kings
to the fond memory of a seaside holiday.

Some of these stories are from recent history;
things you might well remember yourself.
Others are older, tales from centuries ago.
All of these things happened once,
and were as real as this morning's news.
The cheapest souvenir can be a potent reminder.

Spiritual

Religious objects are often admired for their beauty. Whether they are intended for prayer or worship, it is the job of the artist or craftsman to use their earthly skills and the materials available, to create objects with spiritual resonance.

Images of religious figures are especially important. They are designed to inspire and guide us in prayer, whilst also expressing deeper spiritual meanings. Such figures are often accompanied by emblems relating to the figures' spiritual journey, as well as symbolising their special attributes. Similarly, objects designed for ritual and worship are often decorated with symbolic images, sacred figures and sometimes even religious text.

Although all the objects and figures on display probably have a deeper significance for some, they convey a universal sense of spirituality which can be appreciated by everyone.

Spoonline

Spoons are more than just tools for eating.

As tables were not set with cutlery until the 1600s, individuals had to carry a spoon from meal to meal. The silver spoon became a status symbol, and was often a person's only valuable possession, to be passed down from generation to generation.

Babies 'born with silver spoons in their mouths' were thought to have a privileged start in life. A Christian godfather would give his godson a spoon bearing the apostle after whom the child was named and so a spoon became a traditional christening gift.

As new foods and drinks were introduced from 1650, social etiquette developed around the spoon, with different sizes and types for different foods. Middle class Victorians never used a teaspoon for jam, a jam spoon for tea or a dessert spoon for soup. What would you use each of these spoons for?

Object Memories

In time objects gain life histories of their own
acquiring new meanings with each generation.
This is just as true of objects in museums
As it is of domestic and personal possessions.

The objects in this case have been chosen by
members of the local Chinese Wai-Yin Society,
from collections in the Gallery's stores.
Selected for their beauty and craftsmanship,
or for the messages and memories they convey,
the display is one of personal choices and stories.

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